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ABSTRACT

The concept of collaborative learning is discussed, with the following definition offered: "a pedagogical style that emphasizes cooperative efforts among students, faculty and administrators." The paper focuses on the following characteristics: (1) collaboration means that both teachers and learners are active participants in the educational process; (2) collaboration bridges the gulf between teachers and students; (3) collaboration creates a sense of community; (4) collaboration means that knowledge is created not transferred; (5) collaboration makes the boundaries between teaching and research less distinct; and (6) collaboration locates knowledge in the community rather than in the individual. (KM)

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

RECOGNIZING IT WHEN WE SEE IT

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by William R. Whipple

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When people first encounter the concept of collaborative learning, they often ask just what it is. This entirely reasonable question is surprisingly difficult to answer. Indeed, it can befuddle even those who are most experienced in collaboration.

The steering committee of AAHE's Action Community on Collaborative Learning, consisting of eight veteran collaborators, met recently and struggled for several hours for a concise definition. While we did not succeed, we did manage to extract from the concept four key dimensions: 1) a distinct pedagogical style; 2) a distinct epistemology; 3) a distinct set of effects upon participants; and 4) a distinct culture.

Our best first attempt at a definition reads as follows: "Collaboration in undergraduate education is a pedagogical style that emphasizes cooperative efforts among students, faculty, and administrators. Rooted in the belief that learning is inherently social in nature, it stresses common inquiry as the basic learning process. Although academically and culturally challenging, it benefits participants by making them more active as learners, more interactive as teachers, more balanced as researchers, more effective as leaders, and more humane as individuals."

Collaborative learning, however, encompasses an extraordinarily wide range of programs, projects, pedagogical techniques, and classroom strategies. In a recent compendium of collaborative projects, we find students being assigned to groups to develop reports to the class, serving as mentors in science classes or as writing tutors, working with faculty in research projects, and assisting in the redesign of courses.[1] It is no wonder that it is so difficult to explain just what all these models, and many others, have in common. It also explains why our definition is incomplete.

The term "collaboration" is itself difficult to define. Dictionaries approach the word as a synonym for "cooperation," particularly treasonable cooperation with occupying enemy forces. In an educational context, such definitions make little sense. Literally, to collaborate means to work together (co-labor), but this by itself is unsatisfying; a committee that approaches a problem by reducing it to a form that is offensive to none of the members may be working together, but it is not collaborating. Whatever it is, collaboration is not groupthink.

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that is, strictly, undefinable but that can be understood by looking at the characteristics with which it is often (though not invariably) associated. Not all salads consist of vegetables; not all are served cold, or precede the main course of a meal. But if the waiter does bring a plate of cold lettuce and other vegetables before bringing the main course, we can safely call it a salad.

When a concept is characterized in this way, rather than by definition, the outer limits of the concept remain somewhat fuzzy (is a bowl of gazpacho, served before a main course, a salad?) but the concept is well enough understood to be useful. My aim here is to list some of the characteristics that commonly appear in collaborative approaches to education. While this may not uniquely define collaboration, it may help us to recognize the beast when we see it, and may possibly be of use if our aim is to make it appear.

Here, then, are a few characteristics of collaboration, particularly collaboration in educational settings.[2]

1. Collaboration means that both teachers and learners are active participants in the educational process. The need for active student involvement in learning was the theme of the National Institute of Education's 1984 report on higher education,[3] and continues to be emphasized as a means for improving teaching and learning. One of seven "principles of good practice in undergraduate education" developed by Zelda Gamson and Arthur Chickering speaks of the need for active learning techniques.[4] Not all forms of active learning are collaborative, but almost all collaborative situations encourage active involvement. When students work together on joint projects, participate in learning communities, or help to shape the curriculum, it is difficult for them to remain detached from the process of common inquiry that underlies education. It should be noted that when collaboration involves faculty members, as it does in many cases, the result is a heightened degree of *faculty* involvement that complements student involvement in a synergistic fashion.[5]

2. Collaboration bridges the gulf between teachers and students. We are accustomed to sharp distinctions between those who deliver knowledge and those who receive it. Perhaps this arises from our earliest experiences in education—in elementary school where the teacher is physically so much bigger than the student that there can be no confusion as to which is which. In higher education, these physical differences may no longer exist, but still the instructor is the adult, the authority. Above all, the instructor is the one who assigns grades, a fact that inevitably places teachers and students on opposite sides of a "power line."

Whether these sharp distinctions really benefit the educational process is open to doubt. At least in higher education, where students are adults (and an increasing number are adults older than 25), it is likely that this authoritarian structure is an impediment to learning. When students and faculty collaborate, the power line is easily crossed. The External Examination Program at Swarthmore College is a good example. Students are evaluated by panels of external authorities selected by the faculty, rather than by their instructors. This program has flourished for over 50 years and has been remarkably successful in generating a more collaborative atmosphere between faculty and students.

Even in collaboration between students and their peers it becomes apparent that knowledge

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is not solely something that is delivered to students. Rather, it is something that can emerge from an active dialogue among those who seek to understand.

3. Collaboration creates a sense of community. One of the most powerful aspects of collaboration is its challenge to the ethic of individual competition. American culture, in particular, celebrates interpersonal competitiveness as a means to (almost a definition of) success. But many human activities require cooperation rather than competition; and

some of the most important human values are best advanced when citizens respect and practice cooperation. There is evidence that some of the country's most effective academic programs are successful, in part, because they progressively encourage communal, rather than competitive, efforts among students.[6]

It is important to understand that the sense of community thus generated does not imply that all of the collaborating participants will agree on everything. What was said before needs to be repeated: collaboration is not groupthink! In fact, it is precisely through the sense of community produced by good collaboration that individuals become better able to respect the differences and diversities that make them unique.

An analogy to family life may be helpful. A good family does not dissolve the individuality of its members, but provides a base of support upon which the individualities of its members can rest. Successful collaboration can do the same.

4. Collaboration means that knowledge is created, not transferred. Education does not consist merely of "pouring" facts from the teacher to the students as though they were glasses to be filled with some form of intellectual orange juice. Knowledge is an interactive process, not an accumulation of Trivial Pursuit answers; education at its best develops the students' abilities to learn for themselves. Collaborative learning situations encourage students to see their task as the making of knowledge for themselves and their lives, while encouraging teachers to view as part of their craft the skill of creating effective situations for the creation of knowledge.

Another way to say this is that collaboration results in a level of knowledge within the group that is greater than the sum of the knowledge of the individual participants. Collaborative activities lead to emergent knowledge, which is the result of interaction between (not summation of) the understandings of those who contribute to its formation. This does not nullify the value of the individual points of view that combine to create the collaborative knowledge. It is a common misconception that collaborative beliefs about knowledge ignore the value of each knower's contribution. Rather, in a collaborative situation involving, say, six persons, there are *seven* distinct knowledges represented—those of each individual and that of the group as a collective entity. The latter is not antagonistic to the former; rather it complements these to provide richer soil in which ideas can take root.

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5. Collaboration makes the boundaries between teaching and research less distinct. Traditionally, we think of research as the creation of knowledge and teaching as the transmission of that knowledge. But if, as argued above, knowledge cannot really be transmitted, then every act of teaching becomes an act of knowledge creation—that is, an example of research. In this regard it is interesting to recall the notion of the "classroom laboratory" propounded by K. Patricia Cross.[7] From a collaborative point of view, classrooms are necessarily laboratories; what takes place in the classroom is exactly the same thing that takes place in the laboratory: creation of knowledge.

6. Collaboration locates knowledge in the community rather than in the individual. We are accustomed to think about knowledge in a manner profoundly influenced by the Cartesian mind/matter distinction. Knowledge, in this view, is an approach to reality, and reality exists independently and outside of the mind; the mind's task is to "reflect" (in an almost visual sense) an accurate image of that external reality. The beneficiary of learning is the individual mind, and the process of learning consists of transferring into the mind reflections of "true" reality.[8]

Collaborative approaches to learning challenge the assumption that knowledge exists within the mind of the individual. If (as I have claimed above) knowledge is an emergent feature of the social interaction among people, then the knowledge lives in the community; individuals have particular viewpoints upon the collective knowledge, but they cannot absorb it in its pure form into their minds. Only in what Kenneth Bruffee has called "the conversation of mankind" does knowledge find its home, and only through the unending evolution of that dialogue can it be recreated and refashioned into new forms that will enlighten the understanding of future generations.[9]

As stated before, a particular project or pedagogical technique need not reflect every one of these characteristics in order to be called collaborative. But an approach that is related to several of these principles can legitimately be called collaborative, which means that it is part of the emerging revolution in our ways of thinking about the nature of learning and the structure of knowledge. ■

FOOTNOTES

[1]Romer, Karen T. (ed.) *CUE: Models of Collaboration in Undergraduate Education*. Providence, RI: Brown University, 1985.

[2]The collaborative approach can, of course, be applied to other contexts as well. A session at the 1987 AAHE National Conference on Higher Education was devoted to collaboration in academic administration. (Session 41, Collaborative Leadership: How and Why Collaboration Works, organized by Zelda Gamson, Alan Guskin, and Nancy Hoffman, AAHE National Conference on Higher Education, Chicago, March 1987.)

[3]Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education*, Washington, DC: National Institute of Education/U.S. Department of Education, 1984.

[4]Chickering, Arthur, and Gamson, Zelda (organizers). We Can Do It Ourselves! Applying Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. Session 71 at the AAHE National Conference on Higher Education, Chicago, March 1987.

[5]See, for example, Miller, Marjorie. On Making Connections. *Liberal Education* 1983, *69*(2).

[6]SUNY College at Oswego, while in the process of evaluating its Honors Program, administered to students from each class the Spence-Helmreich scale of motivation, which measures several different components of academic motivation including mastery and interpersonal competitiveness. Researchers found that, while motivation for mastery was high for all students (as would be expected in an honors program), interpersonal competitiveness was highest for freshmen, lowest for seniors, and intermediate for other students. For more on this study, see Reihman, J. and Varhus, S. Goals and Means: The Methodology of an Honors Evaluation. *Newsletter of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 1984, *5*(4), 6-9.

[7]Cross, K. Patricia. A Proposal to Improve Teaching -or- What "Taking Teaching Seriously" Should Mean. *AAHE Bulletin*, 1986, *39*(1), 9-14.

[8]The argument that a Cartesian model underlies much of our approach to knowledge is developed in Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

[9]Bruffee, Kenneth. Collaborative Learning and the "Conversation of Mankind." *College English*, 1984, *46*(7), 83-100.

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CONTACTS & RESOURCES

Those of you who are planning or executing collaborative projects may wish to make contact with others who have carried out similar initiatives. One useful resource is CUE (Collaboration in Undergraduate Education), a nationwide network to advance collaborative approaches to academic needs. As one of AAHE's Action Communities, CUE organizes several presentations each year for the AAHE National Conference on Higher Education. CUE also publishes a newsletter, supports other publication efforts related to collaboration, and maintains a mailing list of educators with interests in collaborative learning. For more information about CUE, contact William R. Whipple, Director, UALR Scholars Program, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Little Rock, AR 72204; (501) 569-3389.

Below is a list of individuals with extensive experience in the field of collaboration organized according to the area of their primary experience or interest. Because most of these people have multiple interests, the categorization is somewhat arbitrary; however, it provides a starting point that may help in locating others whose interests correspond with those of your own.

1. Federated Learning Communities

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2. Collaborative research programs for faculty and undergraduate students

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5. Collaborative projects related to specific disciplines

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Computer science and computer applications:
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6. Collaboration for special student populations:

Adult learners:
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Disadvantaged students:
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7. Collaborative curricular development

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8. Collaborative approaches to academic administration

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9. Epistemology and culture of collaboration

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10. Collaboration in teaching and learning in general, with particular emphasis on the role of collaboration in cognitive development

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